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ABSTRACT

Parents can help foster their children's success as readers by reading to them as much as possible. This paper, four of four on literature and the young child, discusses two ways that parents can help, stating that: reading to the child helps him or her develop and appreciate humor; and reading to the child helps him or her cope with uncomfortable feelings. The paper begins with an anecdote which illustrates how humor can alleviate stress. It then discusses how children can develop a sense of humor. The paper contains a 12-item annotated bibliography (No. 7) which recommends humorous books; and another 13-item annotated bibliography (No. 8) which recommends books which help children face uncomfortable feelings. (NKA)

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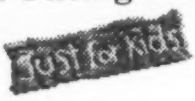
Literature and the Young Child

Part Four: Ages 3 - 8

by Lois W. Stern

Appreciating Humor/ Facing Uncomfortable Feelings



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This is the final segment in a series of articles about Literature and the Young Child. If you missed the earlier segments, do start with **Part One** for an overview and continue with any of the other segments for development of specific topics.

I have been looking forward to writing Part Four of this series with particular eagerness! Yes, it is true that each of these remaining topics helps foster success as a reader, but that is only part of the story. More importantly, each of them helps children, *and for that matter adults,* function successfully in life. Here they are:

- **Reading to your child helps him develop and appreciate humor.**
- **Reading to your child helps her cope with her uncomfortables feelings.**

Let me start by sharing a personal experience. My husband and I were recently dining in a New York City restaurant. The pleasure of the evening was almost marred by the rather rude, brusque manner of our waiter. I could feel those early signs of rising tension: tightening of my face and chest muscles, a deep breath, color rising in my cheeks. Then my husband said: *Do you remember that Seinfeld episode when* . . . As he recounted a particularly funny TV episode involving a rude waiter, we began to roar with laughter. Magically all the stress was gone.

This is what laughter does for our lives. It helps us find the lighter side to potential stressors. It enriches our everyday experiences and helps us continually rediscover joy. It just plain makes us feel good. Humor weaves this exact same magic with children. If you could give your child a pill to accomplish all that, you would run to buy it. But you can begin so effortlessly and safely

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by helping your child discover humor in books, a ready made vehicle available at your public library.

Perhaps your child doesn't particularly like taking baths, and you might not be able to dredge up much humor in this nightly battle. But just try sharing the book *Dad's Car Wash* with your reluctant bather. Both of you will get a good case of the giggles as you read Mr. Sutherland's book about a father and son who create a bath game which brings laughter to this nightly ritual. You and your child might just start enjoying bath time once again!

Humor! How dull our lives would be without it! Books can help us develop the ability to recognize and appreciate the ludicrous, the absurd, the incongruous. The more outlandish the story, the harder children roar. That is why Dr. Seuss books never lose their appeal. Who else could dream up such zany situations filled with blatantly outrageous humor?

Humor allows the sun to shine in our lives. Reading about someone else who has met one of life's inevitable curve balls with humor, helps lighten the heart. It also provides a model for our future behavior. In Imogene's Antlers, the crisis this little girl encounters is so absurd that we have to laugh. But Imogene's ability to face it with such equanimity and good humor is a model worth emulating!

In a narrow sense, exposing children to humorous books strengthens comprehension of the the written word. This exposure helps them grasp rather than overlook the subtleties of humor in literature. In a broader sense, helping children develop a sense of humor provides them with a skill which will enhance their enjoyment of life and provide them with a model for dealing with some of its adversities.

See Bibliography #7 for descriptions of some children's books packed with humor.

If you have a good sense of humor, you may have no difficulty in modeling this quality for your child. It may in fact come to you quite naturally to clown and laugh with your child. But dealing effectively with your child's emotions, especially her uncomfortable feelings, may be more difficult to achieve. This is where books can work wonders because they provide some emotional distance while confronting specific topics.

Suppose your son is experiencing some peer problems on the schoolbus. Other kids are taunting him and generally turning his trip to and from school into a nightmare. One evening you read him Martha Alexander's book *Move Over Twerp.* You needn't even mention that this is a story about another boy who is experiencing similar bus problems if you are concerned that it might make make him more self-conscious. Like many other children, your son may not want to verbalize the fact that he has a problem and is experiencing some of the same feelings as Jeffrey in the story. This is the emotional distance I was talking about a minute ago.

As he listens, your son is nonetheless bsorbing Jeffrey's problem. He might be getting that ah-ha feeling, and thinking: *I felt a little like that myself when I got knocked out of my seat last week.* But he doesn't have to admit those feelings to anyone unless he chooses to do so.

In this book Jeffrey meets with defeat several times before he hits o reative solution. Now that the story has ended, your child is left with several messages:

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1) If at first you don't succeed, try again.
2) You don't have to allow others to bully you. You have rights too.
3) Sometimes there are alternate solutions to problems besides fighting back.
4) Laughter helps us survive.

Since there is a lot of humor in Ms. Alexander's story, your son might even begin to view his situation in a bit more light hearted manner.

When we use books as a means of touching on potential ly sensitive issues, we are entering into the world of bibliotherapy: the use of reading material to solve personal problems. It is best not to question your child as you read, but you can help her open up by talking about one of your own childhood memories of hurtful feelings. For example:

When I was a little girl my parents were invited to a costume party. My Dad was going dressed as a giant. He even laid out his costume in the living room for me to see. Then he went upstairs to get dressed. When I saw him walking down the steps with those huge plaster of paris feet, I was terrified. He wasn't my father anymore. He had been mysteriously transformed into a fearsome giant! I couldn't run fast enough or far enough away. I was just shaking with fear and hid until he left the house. When I was reading the book Changesthat's what I started to remember. I wonder if Joseph felt that scared.

See Bibliography #8 for descriptions of some children's books dealing with troublesome feelings.

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*** About the Author: An active educator for over twenty years, Lois W. Stern has made numerous presentations and led a variety of workshops for parents and teachers. Although themes have varied, all in some way have included the use of children's books in helping to develop literacy skills. After completing a most rewarding career in education, Ms. Stern has been dedicating herself to writing. She currently is co-editor of LI EYE, a Long Island web-zine, and founder and president of *Kidstories*. Her photo-and-fact-personalized children's book and poems can be seen at: http://www.kidstories.com/**

Bibliography #7: Appreciating Humor

List compiled by Lois W. Stern

Key to recommended books:
I: Infant T: Toddler P: Preschool
EG: Early Grades (K-2) MG: Middle Grades (3-4)

Carlson, Nancy, *How to Lose All Your Friends*, Penguin Books, 1994. With tongue in cheek humor and dynamic illustrations, Ms. Carlson develops an instruction booklet for those who don't want to have any friends.

1. **Never smile.**
2. **Never share.**
3. **Be a bully.**
4. **Be a poor sport.**
5. **Tattle.**
6. **Whine.**

Intervening pages provide specifics of how one might fulfill each of these instructions. This book provides us with hilarious peeks at atrocious behaviors. Its pages will tickle the funny bone! Hasn't each of us at some time felt those demons beckoning for us to follow one of Ms. Carlson's instructions?

Age: P EG MG

Cerf, Bennett, *Bennett Cerf's Book of Animal Rhymes*, Random House, 1959. Children love an instant giggle. They also love to perform for an audience. These books provide them with opportunities to both squeal with laughter and entertain others. (See also: *Bennett Cerf's Book of Riddles* and *Bennett Cerf's Book of Laughs*.)

Age: P EG

Cronin, Doreen (Illustrator: Lewin, Betty), Click, Clack, Moo, Cows That Type, Simon Schuster Children's Publishing Division, 2000. When Farmer Brown hears the sounds of a typewriter coming from the cows' barn, he is more than a little surprised. Imagine his amazement when his cows post their demands on the side of the barn! At first he kicks in his heels, but the cows go on strike. As if that weren't enough, they get the hens to join in. No milk, no eggs. Can you and your child predict this humorous ending?
Age: P EG

Hutchins, Pat, *The Surprise Party*, The MacMillan Co., 1969. The old telephone game is reinvented here in this charming story of what is heard and passed along when rabbit whispers in his friend owl's ear:

I'm having a party tomorrow. It's a surprise.

As this message is whispered from owl to squirrel, duck to moose, fox to frog, subtle shifts in pronounciation keep changing the words until they come out sounding like this:

Rabbit is raiding the poultry tomorrow.

For added fun, try playing this old telephone game of a whispered secret at a family gathering or children's party.

Age: P EG

Noble, Trinka H., *The Day Jimmy's Boa Ate the Wash*, (Steven Kellog, illustrator) Dial Press, 1980. When mother asks: *How was your class trip to the farm?*, she wasn't prepared for her daughter's answer:
Kind of boring until the cow started to cry.

As this little girl describes the chaotic chain of events that were set into action when Jimmy took his boa to the hen house, we are treated to one zany incident after another until the entire farm is in an uproar. Children love the slapstick humor of this story! The large, colorful illustrations are filled with vitality and humor - a perfect match for this outrageously funny story. (See also: *Jimmy's Boa Bounces Back*, 1984 and *Jimmy's Boa and the Big Splash Birthday Party*,1989 by this same

author/illustrator team.)

Age: P EG MG

Numeroff, Laura, *If You Give a Moose a Muffin*, Harper Collins Publishers, 1991. A hilarious story about a child run ragged trying to please a clumsy but endearing moose. The uninvited guest makes himself at home in an energetic sequence of events which will delight every child. This is another of Ms. Numeroff's witty circle pattern stories. (Learn more about the significance of story patterns in Part One of this series, followed by other book recommendations of circle pattern stories in Bibliography #2.)

Age: P EG

Rey, H.A., *Curious George*, Houghton Mifflin, 1941, 1969, 1973. There is a whole series of Curious George books which have never ceased to delight children. These books are as popular today as when they were first published some twenty-five years ago. The author uses two winning ingredients to capture his audience: an endearing little animal and innocent mischief. Although George's adventures always manage to land him in trouble, listeners invariable root for him while squealing with laughter at his outrageous behaviors.

Age: P EG

Shannon, David, <u>No David,</u> Blue Sky Press (Imprint of Scholastic) 1998. David is a little boy who seems to forever be doing things he shouldn't. Watch him track clumps of dirt and grass through the living room and run naked down the street while his mom yells "No, David" after each new event. The sparse text and bold uncluttered illustrations makes this a favorite with even the tiniest listeners.
Age: T P EG

Seuss, Dr., *If I Ran A Zoo*, Random House, 1980. Gerald dreams up a new kind of zoo filled with an astounding collection of fanciful animals. He gathers these creatures as he travels to all corners of the Earth. The zany descriptions of his safari and the animals he collects are the theme of this belly laughing book. Wonderful pencil, ink and watercolor drawings fill its pages and add to the humor.

Awards: Caldecott Medal
Age: T P EG

Slobodkina, Esphyr, *Caps for Sale*, Harper Collins Publishers, 1940, 1947, 1988. This is another monkey business story, that has delighted children for decades! A peddler carries his wares on top of his head, caps of many patterns and colors. He leans his back against a tree trunk to take a nap so as to leave his pile of caps undisturbed. When he awakens the caps are gone, but on each branch overhead sits a monkey wearing one of the colorful hats. This story of *Monkey see, Monkey do* lends itself to some hirarious fun. It is also ready made for helping make predictions and for enhancing memory. This is a tale children will love to retell! (See Part two of this series for more information on this topic.)

Age: P EG

Small, David, *Imogene's Antlers*, Crown Publishers, Inc., 1985. This book takes off with a rollicking start as Imogene awakens to find a huge set of antlers growing from her head. Undaunted, she manages to dress, squeeze her way through the doorway and slide three quarters of the way down the bannister - until her antlers get caught on the front hall chandelier. Imogene's mother takes one look and faints. Neither the doctor, school principal nor nerdy brother Norman are much help. But both the kitchen maid and the cook are more resourceful, using Imogene and her lovely antlers alternately as a towel rack and a bird feeder. Mother faints again. The family hires a millener to design a hat to conceal Imogene's antlers. But this huge creation only causes mother to faint once again! By the next morning Imogene's antlers have disappeared just as mysteriously as they had arrived. The whole family is overjoyed - until . . . The last page reveals a hilarious surprise.

Age: P EG

Sutherland, Harry, *Dad's Car Wash*, Atheneum, 1988. John played in the dirt all day. By evening he was ready for a tripto Dad's car wash. Dad turns bath time into a marvelous game by creating a bath tub car wash. He scrubs John's wheels, removes sap from his roof and cleans out his signals. The illustrations are bright and witty. Children will squeal with pleasure at the humorous comparisons of John's body parts to those of an automobile. This book can be used as a springboard to a bathtub game for you and your child. What a creative way to teach the names of body parts!

Age: T P

The following humorous books were already described in earlier articles: *Rosie's Walk* by Pat Hutchins, *Little Rabbit Foo Foo* by Michael Rosen and *The Little Old Lady Who Was Not Afraid of Anything* by Linda Williams described in Part Two, Bibliography #3.
***If You Give a Mouse a Cookie* by Laura Numeroff described in Part One of this series, Bibliography #2.**

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Bibliography #8:
Facing Uncomfortable Feelings:

List compiled by Lois W. Stern

****Key to age recommendations:****
I: Infants T: Toddlers P: Preschoolers
EG: Early Grades (K-2) MG: Middle Grades (3-4)

Alexander, Martha, *Move Over Twerp*, Dial Press, 1981. This story tells exactly how it feels to be bullied by another child. Jeffrey, first one on the bus, finds the perfect seat. Then some big kids come aboard and . . . *the book's title tells the rest.* His family gives him all kinds of advice. None of it works. Then, combining his talents for humor and art, Jeffrey comes up with his own creative solution and discovers that being smaller doesn't mean that he has to be pushed around. Children will empathize with Jeffrey and applaud his talent for problem solving. Colored pencil drawings are simply designed, showing expressive, amusing faces.

Topic: Humiliation, Defeat
Age: P EG MG

(See also *I'll Be the Horse if You Play with Me* by the same author.)
Topic: Sibling rivalry
Age: P EG MG

Arnold Marsha Diane, (Illustrated by Brad Sneed), *The Bravest of Us All*, Dial Books for Young Readers (Penguin Putnam Inc. , 2000. Velma Jean appeared to be the bravest of her seven siblings. She could walk barefoot across a sandbur patch, stroll past the fiercesome bull in the pasture, even walk right up to strangers and say "How-do". She used her acts of daring to mask her one big fear – the fear of going underground. But when she ran from the root cellar as a twister nearly swooped her into the sky, it was her

timid sister Ruby Jane who risked her own life to save her. In this frightening moment Ruby Jane demonstrates the true meaning of bravery.
Topic: Facing fears, the meaning of bravery
Age: EG MG

Bang, Molly, When Sophie Gets Angry – Really, Really Angry . . . , Blue Sky Press (Scholastic), 1999. When Sophie gets angry, she's like a volcano ready to explode. This books makes it plain as the nose on your face! Anger can be frightening. It can also be hard to control. But Sophie's anger is depicted with such humor, that children can identify with it without a bit of fright! Its bold, brightly colored illustrations and sparse text make this book an ideal read for even the smallest listeners.

Topic: Anger
Age: T P EG

Berry, Joy, *Every Kid's Guide to Handling Feelings*, Living Skills Press, 1987. **Although this is a children's book, its contents are a great resource for adults seeking satisfying ways to help their children handle feelings. It defines emotions as feelings which can be either comfortable or uncomfortable. Those that are comfortable make us feel good, as love, acceptance, security, pride, confidence, etc. The bulk of the book talks about those uncomfortable feelings - the ones that make us feel bad. It refines the meaning of each with a bulleted list:**

Fear is feeling frightened or scared. You might:

- **Be afraid of things you don't understand,**
- **Want to get away from things that scare you.**

A second bulleted list talks about resolution, steps to take to get rid of those uncomfortable feelings:

The last section of this book summarizes their four step plan for handling

uncomfortable feelings:

Face it, Accept it, Decide on the action, and Do it.

Age: P EG MG
Topic: How to confront and master uncomfortable feelings

Browne, Anthony, *Changes*, Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. 1995. Joseph Kaye's world is about to change. His father said so. But fear of the unknown causes his imagination to soar. The common and familiar objects of his everyday existence become strange aberrations as Joseph's fear takes on a life of its own. The tea kettle grows ears and a tail, a slipper takes flight, the pedestal sink grows a nose and mouth, the front wheel of his bicycle turns into a giant red apple. Was everything going to change? By the end of the story, Joseph is smiling happily, seated between his mom and his dad, holding his new baby sister. This change isn't so bad after all! This award winning author/artist captures the child's feelings of anxiety tinged anticipation in text and illustrations.

Age: P EG MG
Topic: Anxiety, Fear

Couzn, Jeni, *Bad Day*, Dutton Children's Books, 1988. With a minimum of text and some delightfully, vivid, action filled illustrations, this book explores the feelings of a small boy on a day when nothing seems right. He hates everything including his toys, food and family. When Mom admonishes him with the words: *Go away*, that is exactly what he does. After sprouting imaginary wings, he begins to search for *away*. A wise old owl helps him understand that *away* is a feeling rather than a place. This book conveys the reality of changing feelings and the fine line that sometimes exists between love and hate.

Age: P EG
Topic: Anger, Frustration

Coville, Bruce (Marissa Moss, illustrator), *The Lapsnatcher*, Bridgewater Books, 1997.

Jacob had a new baby sister. He did not like her very much.

These opening lines of text pull no punches. Each subsequent page details further indications of Jacob's distress, in words and mood rendering illustrations. When Mommy first became pregnant he thought having a baby sister would be fun. But as Mommy's middle gradually expanded, he could no longer fit on her lap. And now that Mommy had her lap again, his baby sister was always in it! She was a lapsnatcher pure and simple and he didn't mind telling everyone who would listen. Despite reassurances from Mom, Dad, and Grandmother that they still loved him, Jacob was unconvinced and began dreaming up some outlandish ideas of how he might send the lapsnatcher away. All's well that ends well. Jacob finally asks for and gets what he really needs - some time to sit in his mother's lap and snuggle in.

Age: P EG
Topic: Jealousy

Everitt, Betsy, *Mean Soup*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Publishers, 1992. Horace was having a terrible day! He came home feeling so mean that he stepped on a flower and hissed at his mother. Mom helped Horace get rid of his mean feelings by modeling some socially acceptable ways of banging and screaming. What a creative approach to dissipating anger and avoiding confrontation. Children will adore cooking their own pots of mean soup - even if they're having a good day. Adults will be reminded of how helpful it can be to keep a sense of humor intact! Ms. Everett's illustrations are brimming with color - broad strokes of hot pinks, purples, greens, oranges and blacks - a perfect blend for helping to stir away bad feelings!

Age: P EG
Topic: Anger

Kandoian, Ellen, *Maybe She Forgot*, Cobblehill Books/Dutton, 1990. Jessie is an eager participant at her first dancing class. When it ends, she is the first one dressed and ready to go. She waits and watches as each of the other children is met by an adult and chauffered away. Maybe mother forgot. The illustrations propel this simple story forward to a soothing resolution.

Age: P EG
Topic: Fear, Rejection

Keats, Ezra Jack, *Peter's Chair*, Harper & Row, 1967. The story of the jealousy a child feels for the new baby in the family is one with which many children can identify. Peter feels threatened as he watches Daddy painting his old baby furniture pink for his new baby sister. He runs outside to the sidewalk in front of his house. Mother cleverly coaxes him home with something special for lunch. This is another of Mr. Keat's multi-ethnic books which has enjoyed universal appeal.

See also on this same topic, Alexander, Martha, *When the New Baby Comes I'm Moving Out,* Dial Press, 1979.

Age: T P EG
Topic: Jealousy

Krauss, Robert, (Jose Aruego, illustrator) *Leo the Late Bloomer*, Windmill Books, 1971. Leo is a young lion who just didn't seem to do anything right. He couldn't read; he couldn't write; he never even said a word. Leo's father wondered what was wrong. His mother declared that he was just a late bloomer. Children enjoy watching the sudden blooming of little Leo. This book provides us with an opportunity to discuss the fact that each of us has our own timetable for development, which needs to be respected. A slow start does not condemn anyone to ending last in line.

Age: P EG
Topic: Defeat, Disappointment

Ray, Mary Lyn, (Illustrated by Barbara Cooney), Little Brown and Company, 1999. Over a century ago a group of people know as the basket makers, lived in the highlands of Columbia County in upstate New York. This is the story of one little boy, who longs for the day when he can accompany his Pa to the city, and the unexpected humiliation he feels when he finally gets there. At age nine, this young boy's big day finally arrives. As he strolls behind his Pa on their walk to town, he balances a pole across his shoulders. He feels proud of the baskets created by the skilled craftspeople of his tiny community. This feeling turns to humiliation as they approach Hudson, for he hears the taunts of a man from across the square. Suddenly he is ashamed of his heritage as a basket maker. Big Joe and the wind give him the answers he needs to hear.

Age: EG MG
Topic: Embarrassment, humiliation

Viorst, Judith, *The Tenth Good Thing About Barney*, Atheneum, 1975. In this story, a child deals with the death of a beloved pet. His mother suggests that he make a list of ten good things about Barney to share at his funeral. So he begins to recall the things that made him love his cat and finds that recording those memories helps ease his pain. He comes up with the tenth good thing about Barney while gardening with his dad.

This is a wonderful book to share with young children experiencing the pain of loss in their own lives.

Age: P EG MG
Topic: Grief

For other books about children handling their feelings, read descriptions of:
***Where the Wild Things Are* by Maurice Sendak in Part One, Bibliography #2**
Topic: Anger, Rejection
Anna's Secret Friend* by *Yoriko Tsutsui in Part Two, Bibliography #4
Topic: Loneliness.

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